



Cape to get \$3.4M grant to jump-start wastewater plan

Cape Cod is getting a boost in excess of \$3 billion from the state to help develop a regional wastewater management plan called for under the federal Clean Water Act.

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Cape Cod is getting a \$3.35 million boost from the state to help develop a regional wastewater management plan called for under the federal Clean Water Act.

The Massachusetts Water Pollution Abatement Trust is expected to approve the grant to the Cape Cod Commission at its meeting Wednesday, according to members of the trust.

The move has prompted an outpouring of support from state and local officials who heralded it as an important step toward addressing the damaging effects of excess nutrients in the Cape's bays and ponds.

"You can see that we're being choked," state Sen. President Therese Murray, D-Plymouth, said referring to algae blooms and related impacts of nitrogen from septic systems and other sources.

Current estimates put the cost of managing Cape Cod's wastewater at between \$3 billion and \$8 billion. The hope is the development of a regional plan supported by the grant money will keep overall costs on the low end of that range, according to local and state officials.

The development of a regional plan could also address concerns raised in at least one of two lawsuits brought by two environmental groups against the Environmental Protection Agency over the Cape's wastewater management planning efforts.

"I'm cautiously optimistic," said Christopher Kilian, director of the clean water and healthy forests program for the Conservation Law Foundation, one of the groups suing the EPA.

Kilian said he still wanted to see the framework for the regional plan but that funding it is a very positive step.

The three-member Massachusetts Water Pollution Abatement Trust was formed in 1989 and oversees the state's revolving fund for clean water and drinking water projects. Its membership includes the state treasurer, the secretary of administration and finance, and the commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection.

In a letter sent Monday to the chairman of the trust, state Treasurer Steven Grossman, Murray threw her support behind the grant. It would be funded through a loan origination fee for the state revolving fund for water projects.

"This is the beginning," Murray said. "It's a public information campaign to let people know how important this is."

Although the trust has yet to vote on the funding, members said Wednesday that they expected to approve it.

"There is going to be a meeting held this Friday to work out the mechanics of how to oversee and administer the funds," Grossman said.

Grossman said his family owns property in Centerville, and he is intimately aware of the wastewater management challenges facing the region.

When he ran unsuccessfully for governor in 2002, he went out on a boat with scientists on the Cape and was shown the degradation of local water quality, he said.

"I saw in a heartbeat that we've got issues related to environment, fishing, wildlife, tourism, property values," he said, adding that the long-term future of the Cape is at stake.

Cape Cod Water Protection Collaborative Executive Director Andrew Gottlieb said the development of the plan is consistent with recommendations he and Cape Cod Commission Executive Director Paul Niedzwiecki presented last week to Barnstable County Commissioners.

"It's not going to be some top-down, imposed approach," he said.

Earlier on Wednesday, county commissioners established a separate account for regional planning funds in anticipation of state grants such as this one.

"I think this is the Patrick administration recognizing that the work being done on the Cape was on target," Gottlieb said.

The regional planning process is the appropriate approach for the Cape, Niedzwiecki said, adding that whatever is developed here could be used as a model elsewhere.

"We're ready to go on this," he said. "The only thing we need is ... the resources."

If the commission gets the grant, Niedzwiecki said a draft plan could be ready within about a year.

A complete plan, including the development of more planning tools, a monitoring program and public outreach, would likely take about three years, he said.

The funding is the next logical step to follow up on the work the state has been doing with Cape Cod communities through the Massachusetts Estuaries Project, said DEP Commissioner Kenneth Kimmell.

"We've talked about the benefits of a watershed-based regional solution for quite some time," he said.

The Cape Cod Commission is the successor agency to the Cape Cod Planning and Economic Development Commission, which was originally responsible for the development of the regional plan more than 30 years ago, Kimmell said, adding that the commission would be directed to use the grant money to develop the plan.

"I'm actually really excited," he said, adding that the grant's approval will be significant in two ways.

First it will highlight the state's willingness to partner with Cape communities to come up with solutions to the wastewater problems, he said.

Second, it will send the message that the state is serious about regionwide watershed-based planning efforts, he said.